

**“The Priest Sacrificed in Our Place:
Barth’s Use of the Cultic Imagery of Hebrews in Church Dogmatics IV/1, §59.2”**

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What is the meaning of the cross? How can we faithfully describe the mystery of salvation achieved by Christ at Golgotha? To answer these questions, Christians necessarily turn to Scripture, only to find a vast assortment of images depicting the work of Christ. There are judicial images, sacrificial images, military images, ransom images, etc. Although we can glory in the full panoply of Biblical imagination, the multiplicity of images poses a particularly pointed problem for Christian theologians, for we desire a conceptually adequate understanding of the events narrated by Scripture.

For the theologian concerned with Biblical faithfulness, a number of logical alternatives emerge for relating concepts to images. The first is the “lowest common denominator” approach. One tries to ascertain the basic structure of the atonement at the heart of each of these images. Then he or she can present this idea conceptually without the garnish of images. The potential advantage here is the clarity of presentation. The potential hazard is that something of the richness of Biblical imagery could be lost in the process of boiling it down. Thus the “lowest common denominator” approach is conceptually adequate but biblically unfaithful.

Another option is the “mix-and-match” method: one tries to juggle all the Biblical images at once. A little ransom here, a little sacrifice there, etc. On the one hand, this method has the strength of sticking closer to the text. It also respects the mystery of the

cross and the multiplicity of images it requires. On the other hand, it tends to leave hearers with more questions than answers with regard to their salvation. How do all these images point us to the *one* work of Christ? Thus, although the “mix-and-match” method is biblically faithful, it is conceptually inadequate.

A mediating third option is the “pick one” procedure: one boldly decides to favor one set of images over the others. The inner logic of one set of images is conceptually re-described. The remaining images are used as secondary standpoints that cast additional light on the primary image set. The advantage of this approach is that it achieves conceptual clarity without sacrificing Biblical imagery. The disadvantage is the potentially arbitrariness of favoring one set of images over the others, raising the question of justification: why this one and not another? Also, one might be tempted to interpret the other sets through the lens of the primary set, and therefore run the risk of silencing the unique contribution of these other themes. But, if these disadvantages can be overcome, the “pick one” procedure is both biblically faithful and conceptually adequate.

In his masterful treatment of the cross in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 entitled “The Judge Judged in Our Place,” Karl Barth employs this third procedure. He explicitly elevates the forensic imagery of the New Testament as exceptionally ripe for conceptual re-description. He acknowledges and justifies his procedure in a concluding fine-print section: “When we spoke of Jesus Christ as Judge and judged, and of his judgment and justice, we were adopting a definite standpoint and terminology as the framework in which to present our view of the *pro nobis*. In order to speak with dogmatic clarity and distinctness we had to decide on a framework of this kind. And the actual importance of this way of thinking and its particularly good basis in the Bible were a sufficient reason

for choosing this one.”¹ From this standpoint Barth develops a rich fourfold exposition of Jesus Christ taking our place as (1) the Judge and (2) the judged who (3) enacts judgment (4) justly. Barth considers this fourfold exposition comprehensive and sufficient. As he puts it, “this is the place for a full-stop. Many further statements may follow, but the stop indicates that this first statement is complete in itself, that it comprehends all that follows, and that it can stand alone” (273).

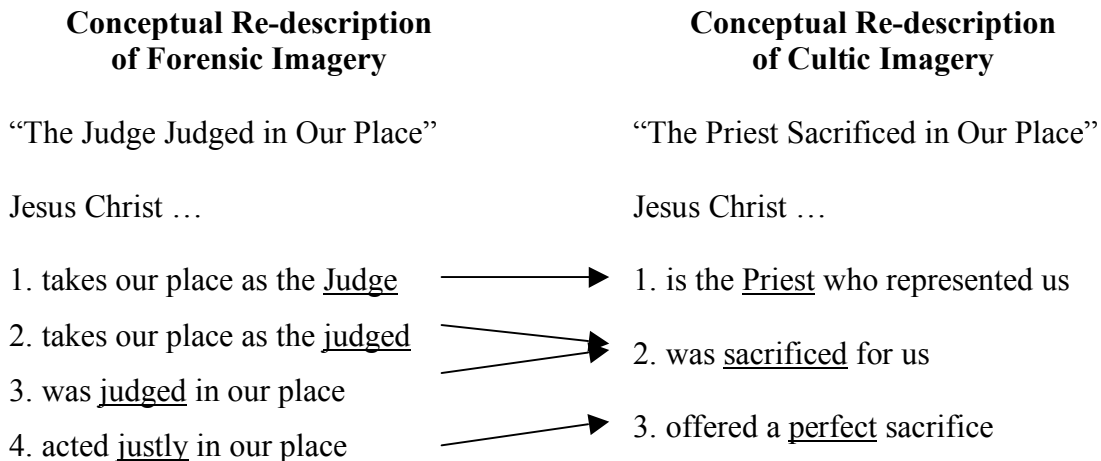
Barth readily admits the danger of this procedure: “exegesis reminds us that in the New Testament there are other standpoints and terminologies which might equally be considered as guiding principles for dogmatics” (273). The variety of images is a reminder that dogmatics is human language that can only speak approximately and therefore “other lines of approximation are possible in principle” (274). Barth lists some alternative lines, such as the financial imagery of ransom and the military language of victory. He then turns to the cultic imagery of sacrifice. Barth acknowledges that this set of images permeates the New Testament, mostly likely because of its Old Testament background. In particular, the Epistle to the Hebrews is “almost completely dominated by it.” Accordingly, Barth proceeds to recapitulate his entire fourfold exposition from this alternative cultic standpoint, making ample use of the language and imagery of Hebrews, including over thirty direct citations.

Barth’s explicit intent is to “see and test from this different standpoint, which is so very important in New Testament thinking, the knowledge which we have gained in the framework of this other outlook” (275). He reminds us that this will not continue, but rather “re-state and verify” his argument in another direction. With the language of testing and verifying, Barth indicates the criterion by which his conceptual exposition

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956) 273. Hereafter cited in-text.

might be judged: comprehensive exegetical adequacy. Is Barth’s fourfold exposition of the doctrine of substitution a procrustean bed which amputates non-conformist imagery? Or is it truly a comprehensive statement, which includes the complexities of the divergent images of the Bible? In particular, does Barth successfully incorporate the cultic imagery of the Epistle to the Hebrews without adumbrating the unique light it casts on the meaning of the cross?

With virtuosic precision, Barth recapitulates his former forensic description point-for-point in cultic terms. The Judge Judged in Our Place is now the Priest Sacrificed in Our Place. (1) Just as Jesus Christ took our place as Judge, so he took our place as Priest. (2) Just as he took our place as the judged, so he took our place as the sacrifice. (3) Just as he was judged in our place, so he was sacrificed in our place. (4) Just as he judged and was judged justly, so he sacrificed and was sacrificed perfectly. The fourfold statement can be recast in cultic terms without remainder. Note that in his exposition of cultic imagery, Barth combines points two and three. This combination can be done without modifying the conceptual statement because both points refer to the historic active passion of the God-Human for us, the former as a participle (the judged / the sacrifice) and the latter as a verb (was judged / was sacrificed).



1. Jesus Christ is “the priest who represented us” (275). He stands in our place as a mediator akin to the priests of the Old Testament and yet utterly unlike them in that he does not make atonement for himself but only for us. This basis of the distinction between priesthood of Jesus and the Old Testament priests is a familiar one, yet Hebrews 9:7 is the only place in Scripture where this distinction is made. Barth goes on to speak of the priesthood of Jesus as true and original along the lines of the comparison with Melchizedek drawn out in Hebrews 7. The Levitical priesthood is limited because it must offer repeated sacrifices, whereas the priesthood of Christ is true because it enacts a sufficient and complete sacrifice. By implication, all other priests are “crowded out” by the one true priest, Jesus Christ. The substitutionary logic parallels nicely Barth’s previous forensic description, as he points out: “In fact we can equally well describe the work of Jesus Christ as his high-priestly work as his judicial work, and we shall mean and say exactly the same thing. In both cases he takes the place of humanity, and takes from humanity an office which has to be filled but which humanity itself cannot fill” (277).

2. Jesus “gave himself to be offered up as a sacrifice to take away our sins” just as he was “accused, condemned and judge the place of us sinners” (277). Here the priestly imagery shifts as Jesus is identified as the Lamb of God who sheds his own blood. Yet the analogy breaks down because in the case of Jesus, the priest *is* the sacrifice. This is a point the Epistle to the Hebrews makes a number of times without any apparent concern over the paradoxical nature of the case. Barth goes on to define sacrifice as the elimination of discord between God and humanity, which is performed in a provisional yet limited form in the Old Testament. “The real problem of sacrifice,” Barth points out, “is not the imminent misuse to which like any cult it can be put, but the fact that ... it

does not in any way alter either sin itself or the situation of conflict and contradiction brought about by sin” (278). As Hebrews argues, the sacrifice of Jesus overcomes the internal limitations of the sacrifice system (278). The death of an animal is not the death of humanity. Jesus Christ offers an effective sacrifice that really removes sin, “because and to the extent that in Jesus Christ God himself has acted in place of the human race, himself making the real sacrifice which radically alters the situation between God and humanity” (280).

3. Jesus Christ “has made a perfect sacrifice in our place” (281). This is the cultic “equivalent” of saying that “Jesus Christ was just in our place” (281). Barth defined perfection in terms of the fulfillment of the will of God. This sacrifice is “proper and definitive,” “acceptable and pleasing” to God, because it actually reconciles God and humanity. Barth notes how Hebrews 10:8f interprets Psalm 40:7 as a sign that the sacrifices of the Old Testament are intended to one day be fulfilled properly and sufficiently, specifically by the *hapax* (once-for-all) character of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Barth incorporates the *hapax* into his earlier forensic exposition, noting its special place in the Epistle to the Hebrews (224). A once-for-all sacrifice is perfect and complete by actually and effectively enacting “the basic alteration of our human situation” (282). This perfect sacrifice thus fulfills the eternal will of God to love sinners. “The perfection of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the whole divine height and depth of the turning made in him, is therefore the perfection of the love with which God has loved us” (282). Paralleling Barth’s previous forensic account of the judgment of sin in Christ, the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ satisfies divine love (254).

Does Barth pass his own test? Does this recapitulation of the fourfold forensic statement in cultic terms work? Does Barth’s conceptual statement of the work of Christ have the adaptability to include without reduction the Biblical imagery of sacrifice? Overall, Barth passes his own test. The conceptual re-description of cultic imagery logically parallels the forensic treatment yet brings its own insights on the matter. The fulfillment of the Old Testament priestly office and the logic of the *hapax* are particular contributions of the Epistle to the Hebrews that stand outside the forensic image set. Barth displays the substitutionary thinking at work in both sets of images, without reducing one to the other or both to some independent theory of substitution. The adaptability of the forensic statement to cultic language verifies its exegetical adequacy.

However, one particular insight from the Epistle to the Hebrews is left out. In contrast to its forensic counterpart, the cultic narration of the work of Christ assigns great significance to the *location* of its execution. The true priest sacrifices in the true tabernacle. This locative element is crucial to the rhetoric of Hebrews. A contributing factor in the universal efficacy of the sacrifice of Jesus is his entrance into the heavenly tabernacle. He enacts an eternal sacrifice once-for-all by entering the more perfect tabernacle through his own blood, according to Hebrews 9:11-12 – a verse Barth cites but does not quote (277). Of course, the rhetoric of Hebrews raises the question of how the historic event of the cross can be regarded as taking place in heaven. The author of Hebrews does make mention of the eternal Spirit who may function as the point of connection between Golgotha and the heavenly tabernacle (Hebrews 9:14). Also, Hebrews places heavy emphasis on the exaltation of Christ, especially in chapter one.²

² See Kenneth L. Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story Behind the Sermon* (Westminster John Knox, 2003) pp. 40-55.

Pointing out this blind-spot in Barth’s exposition does not undermine his overall success in recasting his forensic statement in cultic terms. In a more extended treatment, there is nothing that would prevent Barth from including the heavenly tabernacle. The fine-print section that contains Barth’s use of Hebrews is admittedly small and secondary compared with the detailed discussion preceding it. The absence of this element is not caused by a forensic reduction of cultic imagery; rather, it is a result of the prior decision to favor forensic imagery. At the beginning of this fine-print section, Barth attempts to justify his preference: “If we ourselves have refrained from presenting the whole in this [cultic] framework it is for two reasons. First, and quite simply, material which is already difficult would have been made even more difficult by trying to understand it in a form which is now rather remote from us. Second, and above all, we are able to see the matter better and more distinctly and more comprehensively under the four selected concepts taken from the forensic area of biblical thinking than would have been possible even at the very best if we had committed ourselves radically to a cultic view” (275). Are these reasons true and good? Let us consider each in turn.

In a rare moment of sensitivity to cultural relevance, Barth’s first reason for subordinating cultic imagery is its hermeneutical distance from our modern world. This cultural distance is true enough. But is it a good enough reason to favor forensic imagery? Could it be that the modern notion of law creates a different kind of hermeneutical problem: that of redefinition (a task familiar to Barth)? Could it be that the remoteness of cultic imagery contributes to its rhetorical power? Do not the deep Old Testament roots of cultic language count in its favor?

Barth’s second reason for favoring forensic over cultic imagery is its conceptual clarity and comprehensiveness. If this were true, then it would certainly be a good enough reason to select forensic metaphors as the primary image set. The most clear and comprehensive image is best suited for conceptual re-description. But is this claim true? Are forensic metaphors the clearest? Are they the most comprehensive? To a certain extent, clarity is in the eye of the beholder. Thus the cultural distance factor identified by the first reason comes back into play. Comprehensiveness, however, is a more objective criterion. Is it true that cultic imagery is less comprehensive? Does not the breadth of its use in the Bible and tradition (including especially John Calvin) bear witness to its scope? Does the previously mentioned significance of place (heavenly tabernacle) indicate a potentially more comprehensive treatment? Does the concept of a scapegoat, not mentioned in Hebrews but examined by Barth in *CD II/2*, add to its richness?

These questions of justification ought to be left open for those who seek to learn to read Scripture theologically from Karl Barth. By his procedure of selecting one primary image, he has shown us the better way of relating Biblical imagery and conceptual re-description. He has also displayed that such a procedure need not adumbrate the theological insight of other Biblical images. May we be guided by Barth’s example as we too, with both humility and boldness, conceptually re-narrate the strange new world of the Bible.